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A Note on Ceremonial Purification among the WaYao, Nyasaland. 55

By Meredith Sanderson, M.R.C.S., F.R.G.S.

One of the effects of European influences in Africa is the breaking up of tribal organisation and discipline. The rights of the individual being no longer subordinated to the common good, customs formerly observed by the village community as a whole die out, while those affecting the individual are still practised.

This tendency is well seen in the ancient ceremonies of purification among the WaYao which are now rarely performed collectively, though the native, however highly "educated," still goes to the doctor to obtain the necessary medicines for removing, for instance, the contamination caused by contact with a corpse.

These collective ceremonies have already been described by various writers in respect of both Nyasaland and elsewhere,‡ but the Yao rites have not, I think, been given in detail, and the following notes may not, therefore, be altogether valueless.

The *Pyajila* ceremony (*kupyajila*, "to sweep") is common to most Bantu tribes. In its simplest form it used to be performed annually by the WaYao, at the beginning of the twelfth month, count of the months (lunar) being kept by means of a "calendar."§ The whole village is thoroughly "spring-cleaned," all rubbish

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* At Sta, where the game is played on All Souls' night in the sacristy, Father Barnabas Myer tells me, the song in Spanish runs:—

Yano, yano, quando tu vengo,
Yano, yano, hay mais.

Yano, yano when you come.
Yano, yano, I shall not be there any more.

Words imputed, presumably, to the hidden ball.

† *See* Stevenson, M. C., "The Zuñi Indians," pp. 333-341, XXIII. *Annual Report, Bureau American Ethnology*, 1904.

‡ Frazer, "Balder the Beautiful," II., 170, *sqq.*

§ A "calendar" consists of a string tied to two pegs in the wall of the house, or between two poles, on which are threaded twelve pieces of reed, bamboo or cornstalk. One of these is moved to the other end of the string each time a new moon is seen.

776 THE WHOLE VILLAGE IS THOROUGLY 'SPRING-CLEANED', ALL RUBBISH
[364] is swept up, the ground round the houses is hoed clean, and the interiors remudded. Ceremonial beer is brewed by the head-wife of the chief, and after this has been drunk the ashes of the fire used in the brewing are carefully collected and taken to a *malekano* ("cross-roads," or "diverging of paths") where they are deposited.
[783] The chief, as representative of his people, bathes in special medicated water, a
[824] decoction made from the bank of *ng'ongo* and *mbona*, and the root of *mpingo*.
[621] This completes the ordinary annual ceremony, at which new fire is not made.

On certain special occasions a more elaborate ritual is carried out; such occasions are the death of a chief, a threatened epidemic of infectious disease, a murder (especially by shooting) and the frequent occurrence of quarrels in the village.

In such circumstances, in addition to the ordinary *pyajila* ceremony described above, the porridge sticks of the whole village are renewed and all fires extinguished. The discarded sticks and all ashes of the old fires are carried to the meeting of paths, where the former are stuck upright in the ground and the ashes piled together; this is done in procession, all the people taking part. On their return to the village
[372] new fire is made by friction by either the chief or his younger brother—usually the latter; fire procured in any other way would nullify the proceedings. Finally
[783] all the people bathe in the medicated water used only by the chief at the ordinary ceremony.

751 In addition to this special form of the *pyajila* ceremony, another rite is sometimes
776 performed after the occurrence of a murder or as prophylactic against the spread of epidemic disease. The doctor first makes a kind of trough (*lukungwa*) from the bark of *mtondoroko* or *mpapa*, and procures a *chichiliko* (or *chipengule*) basket—used as a strainer in salt-making. Having collected his medicines he proceeds to the bank of the stream near the usual bathing-place of the village and digs a shallow hole, in which he places the basket; in this he puts the leaves of a certain thorny shrub and covers the whole with the trough, which is banked up with earth so as to be perfectly firm. He then puts his "medicines" into the trough; these are, first, the head of an iron hammer and a piece of slag, both from a smelting furnace. On top of these he puts pieces of the root of a certain tree which has many and particularly sharp thorns, and bits of bark from two trees peculiar for having very straight stems. Having distributed these evenly along the floor of the trough, he fills it with water and then proceeds to construct an arch over the end of the trough furthest from the stream. Two long poles, cut from a kind of tree particularly rich in sap, are planted in the ground, one at each side of the trough and close to it; these are bent over towards each other, and fastened together by means of a strip of their own bark. A bamboo is now planted alongside each, and similarly tied to its fellow. During all these preparations and throughout the ceremony it is essential that the doctor has no knots in any part of his clothing.

The preparations are now complete, and when all the fires in the village have been extinguished the people go in procession to the spot where the doctor awaits them. All must be poorly clad and must have no metal about them.

[622] The chief opens the ceremony. He steps into the trough and taking some of
[769] the medicated water therefrom in his hands he rinses his mouth with it. He then offers a prayer to the spirits of his ancestors, first stating the emergency and detailing the measures which are to be taken to deal with it (new fires, sweeping, discard of porridge-sticks and shaving). The prayer over, he splashes the water in the trough over his body and passes through the arch, first throwing some gift (beads or, in more modern times, money) into the trough. These gifts, presumably
[756] intended as an offering to the spirits, are the perquisites of the doctor, and everybody is supposed to contribute in turn.

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The man and boys now pass through the arch in order of seniority; each splashes himself with the water in the trough, but neither speaks nor rinses the mouth. The women come next, led by the head-wife of the chief; the latter rinses her mouth and, instructed by the doctor, repeats a prayer similar to that offered by her husband. The remainder of the women merely splash themselves, like the men, before passing through the arch. All then return to the village, where the *pyajila* is continued. 751 796

Finally the doctor takes the hammer-head from the trough and hands it to the chief, who refits the haft into it, and, a hoe having been placed on the ground, goes through the form of forging the latter by beating it with the hammer. He then scrapes the ground with the hoe as if clearing a place overgrown with grass; he does not dig with it as in hoeing up the ground for planting seed. After this rite the chief again bathes in medicated water similar to that in the trough, and the ceremony is complete.

Whereas the *pyajila* ceremony and its adjunct, the rite of the arch, are now but rarely performed, no Yao will omit the rite of purification after a death in his family. This ceremony consists of two essential parts, both protective against the *ndaba*, a disease characterised by dropsy and supposed to be contracted by contact with a corpse, or by association, especially by sharing a meal, with those who have been in such contact. The first of these parts is bathing in certain medicines, which protects the bather from *ndaba*, and the second consists of a sort of communion meal, shared by all friends and especially relatives with those who have been contaminated, and designed to protect those friends and relatives. [178] 751 764 796 783

The decoction for bathing is made by soaking the roots of *lugwalambati* and *lumlemela* in water, together with the bark of *mkomwa*, one piece each from the east and west aspects of the tree; the water assumes a reddish tint, and the whole body is bathed. 751 783 824 765 [262]

The communion meal consists of porridge made from any kind of flour or of rice, and some *nyanda* beans. In the latter some scorched and powdered root of *mtandanyelele* is mixed, with a little salt. All near relatives of the deceased must partake of this meal, as well as their wives and their near relatives; part is carefully put aside for the use of any relative unable to be present at the ceremony.

Latterly, since the spread of Islam among the WaYao, this rite has become confused with the distribution of food to the poor at the funeral of a Muslim, and the Arabic word *sadaqa* ("charity") is now generally used for it, to the exclusion of its wider, correct meaning. [177] [797]

It may be mentioned here that after the death of a child the father is denied access to his wife for a period of about three weeks, and the first act must be one of *coitus interruptus*. 765 784

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